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Religious Worlds of New York • Curriculum Development Project

Encountering Native American Spirituality through Bibliodrama

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Abstract

This project exposes students to a range of representative Native American stories by using a technique borrowed from the study of the Bible, known as Bibliodrama, as a means of integrating Native American Spiritualities into the World Religions curriculum.

Typical survey courses in World Religions tend to focus their time and attention on the “big five” – Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. In so doing, they miss out on a tremendous opportunity to explore indigenous spiritualities – particularly those of the Americas – and their cultural context in our nation’s history. Because Native traditions tend to be less systematized and more organic in their development, teachers are challenged to create a methodology that can prioritize folkloric storytelling over sacred texts and doctrines, ritual over creed, pantheism over mono- or polytheism.

Curricular Context

Grace Church School offers a Philosophy and Religion course for 9th and 10th graders, with the 9th grade course specifically offering an introduction to world religions. The course meets only one hour per week, on “lab day,” a day in the schedule that is frequently commandeered for other purposes – field trips, tutorials, and so forth. Accordingly, our time together is very limited, and we tend to lose class days fairly frequently. This means that “minor” spiritual traditions have to go by the wayside. Ironically, Native American spirituality falls into this “minor” category despite being (in many ways) the closest to home, with the Iroquois and Algonquian tribes shaping the history, geography, and culture of [New York State](#).

Why Bibliodrama?

If one has the resources to invite an actual indigenous storyteller into the classroom, this would offer the best possible exposure for students. But failing that, and given the logistical hurdles of finding an appropriate speaker, I would like to suggest the heuristic and performative tool of *Bibliodrama* as a very powerful alternative.

The term “Bibliodrama” originated about fifteen years ago in both America and Europe as a way of bringing stories from the Bible to life, and in so doing, uncovering deeper layers of meaning that might be applicable to participants’ lives:

Most simply described, Bibliodrama is a form of role-playing in which the roles played are taken from [the] biblical universe. The roles may be those of characters who appear in the Bible, either explicitly and by name (major characters like Adam and Eve, Mary or Martha, or minor characters like Seth or Elizabeth). Bibliodrama may call forth figures whose presence may be inferred from an imaginative reading of the text (Noah’s wife or Simon Peter’s mother). In Bibliodrama the reservoir of available roles may also include certain objects or images which can be embodied in voice and action (the ark which carried the infant Moses down the Nile, or the Cross on which Jesus died). Places can speak (the Jordan River or Calvary). Or animals may speak (The Serpent in the Garden; the rooster which crowed at dawn). In Bibliodrama one may give expression to spiritual figures (angels, or God, or Satan). Then there are figures in the Jewish and Christian tradition that belong to legend and apocrypha – Lilith, for example, or Susanna – who may be brought on stage in Bibliodrama. Bibliodrama allows us to imagine and to represent the entire biblical universe as a field of imaginative play.¹

At first glance, it may not seem intuitively sound to apply a method derived from biblical studies to a tradition as disparate and distinct as Native American spirituality. Caveats should therefore be issued regarding the differences between written and oral traditions, the use of story in the Bible versus in indigenous contexts, and so forth.

That said, I personally experienced the method in action in a recent seminar on Narrative Medicine, led by Cherokee healer and *Coyote Medicine* author Lewis Mehl-Madrona. Narrating the Penobscot creation myth, Mehl-Madrona assigned each member of our group a role in the drama much in the manner of Bibliodrama: [Glooscap](#) (the creator), Mother Earth, First Man and First Woman, the Children of Earth, the corn and tobacco in the field, and so forth. As Mother Earth’s body was sacrificed so that nature could grow from it, she left her children behind with an implicit obligation to remember her by tending to the elements of the Earth to come. As we stood and moved around in dialogue with one another, the Children’s sadness was registered, as was the utter dependence of Corn and Tobacco on their human stewards. As a coda to this story, we, the characters role-playing this drama, were told to *continue the story* as we thought it would or should evolve. Thus, we emerged not as a passive audience to the narrative but as active participants, drawn into the ritual play-sphere and thereby implicitly participating in creation as (of course) we all do in real life.

¹ <http://www.bibliodrama.com/bibliodrama-a-call-to-the-future/>

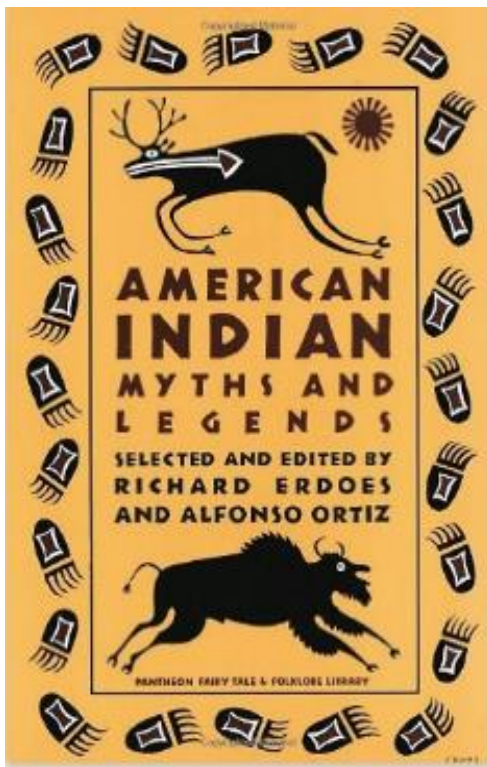
Storytelling in Indigenous Cultures

Because much of indigenous spirituality is communicated through stories passed down orally, rather than through sacred texts or codified doctrines, a teacher hoping to capture these traditions authentically must heed to the importance of narrative. As one source [has remarked](#),

Native American storytelling was focused on helping people understand their place in the natural world. Native American tales were - and still are - part metaphorical, part real, part spiritual, part mythological, part instructional and part transformational. Most of all, however, they were entertaining and memorable to the audiences who heard them. This guaranteed these stories would be remembered and passed down to the coming generations, who needed to understand who they were, where they had come from, and why the world is the way it is, if they were to survive and prosper in the challenging times that were – and still are - always just ahead.

The best way to enliven a student’s understanding of Native American spiritual beliefs, therefore, is to present them in the way indigenous peoples themselves would have experienced them in a lived context – not as chapters in books to be pulled off of a library shelf, but around the campfire or as part of a ritual circle, brought to life by the vivid improvisations of a master storyteller.

What kind of stories work best?



Copious resources exist both online and in print to offer a range – but certainly not a “representative” one, given time constraints – of themes in Native American spirituality.

Among ideas that could or should be covered, one might consider:

- [Creation myths](#)
- [Trickster tales](#)
- [Wisdom animals](#)
- [Vision quests and dreams](#)
- The role of the shaman or elder
- Explanations of natural phenomena/the [relationship to nature](#)
- Instruction in practical skills such as hunting, farming, or building

In addition to these general topics, I would like to specifically recommend the anthology [American Indian Myths and Legends](#) (1985), edited by Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz. Ortiz, an anthropologist, and Erdoes, a master storyteller, have combined in this volume to collect 166 tales, both classic and contemporary, that explore the breadth of indigenous folklore in North America.

In a suggestive quote indicative of how the Bibliodrama approach might prove congenial, the editors cite Ernst Cassirer: “The mythical world is a dramatical world – a world of actions, of forces, of conflicting powers. In every phenomenon of nature it sees the collision of these powers.” Bringing to life the powers and forces of this “dramatical world” will help students understand Native American lore and spirituality better, while also allowing them to engage with a text in a completely different way, perhaps even activating different learning styles than the purely visual. Auditory and kinesthetic learning will be of the essence in this approach.

Overall outcomes

Because this will be a one-off activity in my religion class, there is no possibility or likelihood of a summative assessment. As a result, students will be assessed on their willingness to participate and engage. The overall purpose of the exercise is not only to teach students something about Native American spirituality, but also to demonstrate a new way of interacting with and understanding narratives. That the approach demands a heightened level of participation will make it a useful vessel for communicating “lived religion,” in the sense that they will literally inhabiting the characters and connecting them to the concerns of the present.

For information about the Religious Worlds of New York summer institute for teachers, and more resources to enrich your teaching on religious diversity, see: www.religiousworldsnyc.org.